DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 321 269 CS 212 419

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TITLE Composition Classroom Anthologies: Some Exploratory Thoughts and Suggestions for Further Research.
PUB DATE Jul 90
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Conference on Rhetoric and the Teaching of Writing (Indiana, PA, July 10-11, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Anthologies; Essays; Higher Education; Reader Text Relationship; Reading Writing Relationship; Textbook Content; *Textbook Evaluation; Textbooks; Writing Attitudes; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Commercially Prepared Materials; Reading Motivation; *Textbook Design; Writing Models

ABSTRACT

A writing instructor, who informally surveyed 11 current essay anthologies to determine why such anthologies discourage students from reading and writing, suggests problems relating to three aspects of physical design. First, many anthologies alienate composition students by their distinctive textbook-styled covers. These covers do not suggest that the essays were written by real people, nor that the essays were written for real-world occasions. Instead, the covers suggest that the essays were written by specially gifted authors of inherently superior intellect and talent. Second, essay anthologies with tables of contents built around modes and developmental patterns almost certainly send the wrong message to student writers as to how their minds work, and how good writing tends to get written. The third physical design flaw of anthologies is the paragraph numbers, placed either in the indentations of paragraphs or in the outside margins of the texts. Such numbers call attention to themselves and away from the essays, suggest reading and writing are mechanical rather than organic activities, and imply that the goal of reading is almost exclusively a chore rather than enjoyment. (Suggestions for further research are included; a list of 12 works cited is attached.) (KEH)

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Composition Classroom Anthologies: Some Exploratory Thoughts and Suggestions For Further Research

INTRODUCTION

Many college composition instructors order essay anthologies for their students, and many students use these texts to read essays chosen by their teachers or chosen by the students themselves. At the same time, a fairly thorough review of scholarship shows that almost no one writing today about college composition classrooms has written about the nature and use of such anthologies. Since such books often have a central place in the composition classroom, and yet few analyses on these texts exist, composition teachers who wish to teach from consciously and critically informed perspectives should identify the value of these texts, if any, for the composition classroom.

To develop my own perspective on the value of essay anthologies, I informally surveyed eleven current or recent texts. Most of the texts contain only essays, while one or

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two contain essays intermixed with writing handbook materials. Regrettably, I have concluded that to varying degrees even just the physical designs of many anthologies discourage rather than encourage students to read and write, and often do so for very similar reasons. This paper offers some explanations as to how such anthologies discourage reading and writing, and offers suggestions on further research that might verify my hypotheses.

My comments on the anthologies grow from only the personal review I could do, without interviewing scores of students from composition classes. Lacking such research, I caution readers against taking my statements as authoritative. Instead, I encourage interested readers to share with me their impressions of these texts and/or to perform research with college composition students to test the validity of my impressions. To eliminate further suspense, I suggest problems among essay anthologies in the following three aspects of physical design: textbook-styled covers, tables of contents organized by modes and developmental patterns, and numbered paragraphs of the essays.

TEXTBOOK COVERS

Many anthologies first alienate composition students by their distinctive textbook-styled covers. These covers do not suggest that the books contain essays by real people like the students. Nor do they suggest that the essays in the

texts were written for real-world occasions. Instead, the covers suggest that the enclosed essays were written by specially gifted authors of inherently superior intellect and talent. And they suggest that the essays are designed especially, or perhaps only, for writing courses and writing students.

One representative example of an anthology with an off-putting cover is Assignments in Exposition, 9th ed., edited by Louise Rorabacher et al. To me, the word "Assignments" in the title and the livid green color of the cover suggest first that school readings should not and, by gosh, will not be enjoyable. Second, the title suggests that good writing results not from practice or linguistic experimentation coupled with feedback from an audience of fellow students, but from training through assignments carefully designed by none other than the teacher. After all, who else in school gives assignments but teachers?

The mock-marble swirls of the cover and its tan and black scrollwork also are off-putting. What better way to suggest that the essays herein are nothing less than unapproachable literary classics than to clothe them in "marble"--the very stone of ancient Greek and Roman statues, classical architecture, and other kinds of cold and forbidding environments--and then to complement the marble with scrollwork suggesting the richness of gold filigree?

One might counter-argue that, upon opening such anthologies, students immediately recognize that essays

contained therein come not from the wisdom of the ages, but from newspapers, magazines, and other more mundane publications in which students eventually might publish. For at least three reasons, I have doubts about this claim. First, even after a sufficiently long and detailed discussion of what essays are and are not, many college students continue to call essays something like "short stories," suggesting continued confusion about the literary genre they are reading. Second, when asked where professionally written essays usually come from, many students simply don't know. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, many anthologized essays do come from ancient texts and--whether wise or not--often impress students merely by their longevity on the literary scene, not by any hard-won merit.

TABLES OF CONTENTS

As the word "Exposition" in Rorabacher's title suggests, tables of contents often group essays by the traditional rhetorical modes of narration, description, argumentation, and exposition--and that expository essays should be classified as analytic, comparative, contrastive, etc. Among the eleven anthologies I reviewed, five of them classify their essays by modes and/or patterns of development in a primary or secondary table of contents (Goshgarian, Rorabacher, Scholes, Webb, and Wyrick). Four use other organizational patterns in the opening tables of contents, but list essays by modes and developmental patterns in the

backs of the books (Clifford, Hall, Miller, and Sommers). Only two of the eleven refuse to classify their essays by modes and patterns (Bartholomae, Steiger).

As I once mentioned to fellow composition teachers in a graduate class entitled "The Rhetorical Tradition and the Teaching of Writing," to this date I have arranged my composition class readings and writings around modes and developmental patterns, but always have had misgivings--sometimes grave, sometimes mild--about doing so. To my relief the class members have verified that my misgivings have some value. Now I at least can verbalize what until recently was only a subconscious unease. I now sense that good writing usually results from discovering one's topic before discovering the form in which to express it. Or perhaps more accurately, because content and form ultimately are inseparable, writers discover their content and form simultaneously. (Notice my hint at which is the more accurate way to express the idea I struggle towards.) Thus, forcing writers to obligate themselves to a modal or developmental form before any other part of the writing process demands that they attempt to violate the very way in which their minds normally or most effectively work.

My point here is that essay anthologies with tables of contents built around modes and developmental patterns almost certainly send the wrong message to student writers as to how their minds work, and how good writing tends to get written. Better to organize essays by dates of composition, dates of

publication, general topics, or alphabetically by author's last names. Alphabetic arrangement may send the least imposing message to students, since this arrangmenet is the most arbitrary of the four listed above.

With such a haphazard arrangement students may feel less intimidated by the authorial status inherent in listings by name. As well, such an arrangement leaves room for students to read whom they want in the order they want, and not feel that they are violating some long-established, long-revered hierarchy of experts or final authorities. For those curious about statistics on this point, of the eleven anthologies reviewed, four of them use this alphabetical arrangement that I prefer (Bartholomae, Clifford, Hall, Sommers).

One might respond that allowing students free rein in choosing readings violates one of their most legitimate and reasonable expectations--namely that they come to composition classrooms partly to learn what academicians view as the best that has been thought and said in human history, whatever "best" might mean. Certainly, this complaint has some merit. But such merit does not obligate writing teachers to send inaccurate messages about the nature of good reading and writing, nor does it obligate teachers to make composition activities any more forbidding than they already must be.

NUMBERED PARAGRAPHS

The third physical design flaw of anthologies that discourage rather than encourage reading and writing is

paragraph numbers, placed either in the indentations of paragraphs (e.g., Clifford) or in the outside margins of the texts (e.g., Webb). Such numbers convey at least four undesirable messages:

1. Whether located in the paragraph indentation or the margin, they stand out noticeably from the text, calling attention to themselves and away from the essays that readers supposedly are reading.

2. Because they come paragraph by paragraph, they automatically imply that the paragraph is the most important sub-unit of essay organization, which may be true in some essays but not in others.

3. They suggest that reading and writing are mechanical rather than organic activities. Such a message misrepresents the nature of reading and writing processes, which result from both rational and irrational choices, both conscious and unconscious mental activities, and both mental and emotional/physical factors.

4. They emphasize an image of reading as almost exclusively a job, a chore, a relatively passive activity, a pulling out of information--and not also as an act of play, of joy, of entertainment; as a dynamic activity or as an act of reading in. In other words, such numbers suggest that the goal of reading is to "cover ground," to add up or consume paragraphs, to pile up knowledge in a way analagous to memorizing facts and figures for a multiple-choice test.

Granted, numbered paragraphs make it far easier to track

down desired passages in class discussions. However, such an approach also seems a sure way to help kill or damage both understanding and enjoyment of such texts, and kill many opportunities to see how authors put texts together on a larger scale than from just paragraph to paragraph. Likewise, the numbers often direct readers away from one of the most important qualities of writing: its ability to surprise, to unsettle, to reform hearts and minds through its explosive unpredictability, to change the world for good--or ill.

To say that numbers irrelevant to the meaning of a text (unlike numbers in a list, for example) really can hurt people may seem a grandiose claim. However, this claim makes great sense when we remember that many people in history with great eloquence or other forms of power have shown more interest in protecting numbered and codified and subdivided texts and rules than in serving the human beings for which the texts and rules supposedly were written.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

1. Print two sets of a text, one set having textbook-type covers and titles and the other having trade-type covers and titles. Before students read any essays in each text, ask them to look at the different covers and theorize about the nature and purpose of the writing in the books. I hypothesize that viewers of the trade-type covers will describe writing as more relevant to them as individuals and

social beings than will viewers of textbook-type covers.

2. Teach one section of a composition class with a traditional anthology containing works by many writers, and teach another with a few one-author essay collections. I hypothesize that the class with the one-author collections will understand their authors more accurately and more deeply, and more easily will see the opportunity to create not just isolated essays as school exercises but rather groups of essays that are more sincere, more developed, and more relevant to their student authors and to the world outside the classroom.

3. Print some copies of the same anthology with paragraph numbers, and some without numbers. Then use the different versions of the same anthology in different sections of a composition class. I hypothesize that anthologies lacking paragraph numbers may seem harder to understand at first, but that students using these anthologies eventually will surpass, in both reading comprehension and satisfaction, the group with anthologies containing numbered paragraphs.

4. For those instructors in schools that would allow it, eliminate anthologies altogether and have students bring in photocopies of essays from non-anthologized sources such as newspapers, magazines, general-purpose journals, academic journals, and so on. I hypothesize that students will say that acquiring their readings was harder than if they had bought anthologies of their own. However, they will develop

more understanding of where, when, why, how, and by whom essays are written and read. And through their searches they also will learn more accurately and thoroughly how academic research typically occurs.

A valuable variation on the idea of eliminating assigned anthologies comes from Anne M. Sullivan, a high school teacher who recommends having students create anthologies from both professional and personal writings, complete with bindings, title pages, tables of contents, prefaces, etc. Sullivan argues that such anthologies help motivate students to read more widely, more eagerly, and more happily. What's more, these students also tend to continue reading on their own after graduating from Sullivan's class, and become more aware of everything from the variety of published reading materials to information about their own families, geographic region, and cultures (27-30).

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